Rich Man - Poor Man
Luke 16:19-31
June 20, 1971
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Observers and analysts of American culture are saying that we are in the middle of a process of change, far-reaching in nature and radical in significance. Young people are the vanguard of the process: as usual, they are on the cutting edge. And before we dismiss what they are doing and saying to us, we need only recall that a few brief years ago we were muttering under our corporate breath about long hair, side-burns, wide ties, and have since gradually adopted the same while the young move on out to another frontier. In any case two separate, but related, phenomena of youth culture are intriguing in that from them we can learn a little about where the process of change is taking us.

First, it now appears to be indisputable fact that college students and recent college graduates are concerned less about making money and concerned more about doing something personally rewarding with their lives. That's a recent but significant alteration in the fundamental ground rules of coming of age in America. Not long ago - just a decade - the commonly accepted goals were to go to college, to get a degree, to get a good job, to enter the consumer oriented paradise of middle America. But today, survey after survey, reveals that the young aren't buying it any more. More and more students are looking for viable alternatives such as voluntary service: young attorney's are involved in legal aid societies: young physicians are starting community health clinics: and even the President's new son-in-law did a stint with Nader's RAiders.

Now, there is a sense in which the young are free to move in this direction as a result of their parent's hard work and sacrifice. There is a very real sense in which parents goals get rejected because the children have never known a time when those goals were dreams instead of everyday reality. And yet change is afoot. There is more to life than riches, and a whole new generation of people is in the process of creating life-styles built on that

premise.

The second phenomena in youth culture is a significant revival of interest in religion. The range is wide, all the way from Eastern mysticism to the fundamentalism of Youth for Christ. The cover article in this week's issue of Time magazine analyzed the phenomenom and concluded that it is real, that it is far more than a fad, that it means a new day for the Gospel of Jesus Christ in the Church - if we are open to newness and change, or outside the Church if we persist in ignoring it.

The characteristics of this new interest in orthodox Christianity sound as if they were taken directly from the New Testament. Jesus Christ is regarded as savior and lives are changed by the transforming power of God. The style is open and straight forward and honest. The approach is totally personal. Converts embrace one another, and express their newly found community in Christian communes, drug rehabilitation centers. One leader of the movement was quoted in Time, "I'm amazed at how many people I've counseled who have never heard their fathers say 'I love you'".

Now, put the two together, and what I hear the kids saying is that life is too brief to be wasted in the persuit of affluence alone: that true joy, or salvation, is to be found in deep relationship with other people - in openness to everybody; and that the way to this new, incredible joy, is Jesus Christ.

That is, I hear the same message from these two components of youth culture that I hear in our disturbing New Testament lesson this morning.

Rich man - poor man, a hackneyed, well-worn theme if there ever was one, with shades of Ebeneezer Scrooge and Bob Cratchett. And yet, in this version of the old story there are some uncomfortable revelations about you and me, and the effect - in the words of one commentator - "leaves us unmasked and defenseless." [Buttrick - The Parables of Jesus, p. 137]

The first part of the parable is a simple tableau. There are two

characters, a rich man and Lazarus, a poor man. The rich man is dressed in costly purple and fine linen. Every day he eats extravagantly. And every day, to the gates of his estate comes Lazarus, hungry, filthy, half clothed with rags, followed by a pack of dogs. Lazarus comes every day, we can assume, because he is the beneficiary of the rich man's garbage, the main part of which would have been those scraps of rough bread the wealthy used for napkins. It is not a pretty tableau.

The second part of the parable takes place when the two men have died. The rich man is in torment, the poor man is in bliss, symbolized by the bosom of Abraham. A dialogue occurs. The rich man requests a drop of water to cool his tongue. Abraham refuses. There is a gulf between the two.

Finally the rich man requests that Lazarus be dispatched to warn his brothers of their fate. This request, too, is denied.

Now, for some observations. We are dealing with a parable - and the biggest trouble with parables is that people try to make them say too much. This is not a Rand McNally road map of eternal life. We are dealing here with symbols, not literal fact.

The meaning of the story is to be found somewhere in the rich man's predicament. The job of interpreting would be a lot simpler if there were some suggestion that he had been a bad man: that he had accumulated his wealth by stealing and oppressing, or that he spat on Lazarus as he walked by everyday, or that he ordered his servants to drive Lazarus away. But there is no intimation that the rich man had done anything wrong. In fact, the daily presence of Lazarus at his gate leads me to conclude that the rich man fed Lazarus, perhaps sending more than the daily accumulation of scraps and garbage on occasion. Lazarus,came because he knew he would get food.

And so on the surface it looks as if the point of the parable is simply that inequities in life will be remedied in the after life, which is very good news to the poor, and very bad news to everyone here.

I think the point of the parable, however, is a little deeper than that. I think the rich man's guilt was not in his riches. I think his sin was that he never really saw Lazarus. He passed him daily, to be sure. But to him Lazarus was a social problem, a statistic, an unpleasant interuption who could be dealt with by way of a few greasy left-overs. I think his sin was that the relationship he chose to establish with this poor man was on the basis of benevolent hand-outs, and that the effect of the relationship was, one- to make him feel good and kind and charitable, and two - to totally strip Lazarus of his dignity and worth and personhood.

I think there is a clear word here for us as individuals, and together - as the Church of Jesus Christ. As I was thinking about this sermon Friday morning at eight o'clock, over a second cup of coffee, I received a telephone call from the Department of Public Welfare. I am on the Board of Trustees and a welfare recipient had sent me a letter - which I asked the director to read over the phone. I shouldn't have. The writer was an 81 year old recipient of Old Age Relief whose allotment was cut recently because of an increase in Social Security Benefits. The writing and spelling and grammar were atrocious - but the gist of the letter was quite clear. Here was a lonely, forgotten old man who mattered to no one, and whose ability to survive depended on the greasy scraps of bread doled out by the State of Indiana. But his letter transformed him from a statistic to a person - who had addressed me as a person. In fact his letter stated - quite personally - that he needed to eat just as badly as I do. What do you do with that? Forget it? Look the other way? Return the old man to the proper manila folder? Suggest that he hire an attorney and make a formal appeal? Or take a basket of food? You see, the problem is that none of these gets the job done - and we are now stuck with a person on our conscience.

It's a continuing kind of problem in our society. We're busy, hurried, tending to our own vineyards. We don't have the time or the resources to

solve the world's problems; we have plenty of our own. In fact, we have what the sociologists are beginning to call "compassion fatigue". Through the mass media we are exposed to more tragedy and suffering than our sense can assimilate. If My Lai had happened in World War II we might have read about it in the history books. But this time around we were treated to a color picture of a wounded nine year old sheltering the body of his six year old brother moments before they were both shot. A cholera epidemic might be reported in medical journals but today you can turn to page 25 of Time magazine and see a picture entitled "Mother watching her child die of Cholera."

And so our senses rebel and refuse to record what we see. Our defenses go up and we shut it out - in the same way that the rich man found a way gracefully to walk by Lazarus every day. And the way we are able to accomplish it is by jamming everybody into a category, into the safe anonymity of statistics: epidemic victim: war casulty: welfare recipient. We can handle that.

The word here to us as individuals is quite simple and quite clear. Someone in our impersonal world had to remember that statistics are people. That the weekly body count in Southeast Asia ultimately is reduced to one dead individual and a widow and fatherless children. Someone has to bear the scorn of society's "realists" who can't be bothered with bleeding hearts. Someone has to remember that we are brothers, that individuals matter, the people are the only sacred entities in our common life - not the flag: not the Church: not our institutions - but people. The alternative is hell - the kind of hell in which my aged friend already lives: the hell of Viet Nam - the hell of the ghetto. The hell of which you and I are already a part.

There is a word here for us as Church, as corporate entity which has identity and life in the world. The Church through history has done more to alleviate human suffering than all the other service agencies and organizations put together. We don't want to forget that. But we do need to remember that as society becomes more complex the Church's responsibility must become more sophisticated. That is to say, the Thanksgiving Basket approach to the